DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 359 085 SO 022 348

AUTHOR Roberts, Leonard H.; Pollman, Mary Jo
TITLE Women's Emancipation through Education: The Radical Agenda of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797).
PUB DATE [92]
NOTE 43p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Change; *Educational History; Educational Opportunities; Educational Philosophy; Educational Theories; Elementary Secondary Education; *Equal Education; Females; *Feminism; Sex Bias; Sex Discrimination; *Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS *Wollstonecraft (Mary)

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WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION THROUGH EDUCATION:

THE RADICAL AGENDA OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT (1759-1797)

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Abstract

Two hundred years ago, Mary Wollstonecraft, the English women's rights pioneer, published her immortal work: A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN. In it she placed much of the blame for women's inferior political, intellectual, and social status on "faulty education." In VINDICATION, she offered a number of recommendations aimed at enhancing the quality of education for women. These included: boys and girls schooled together and sharing a curriculum rich in experiential learning, particularly in scientific studies. She advocated physical exercise and play as well as health education specifically aimed at women's needs. These and other educational proposals marked her as an important progenitor of many modern and widely accepted educational innovations.

WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION THROUGH EDUCATION:

THE RADICAL AGENDA OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT (1759-1797)

The publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's "A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN in 1792, represented probably the first sustained argument in English for women's rights."[1] It helped articulate an emerging debate within English society and on the Continent regarding the legal, political, intellectual and social status of women. The work also focused on Wollstonecraft's argument that the "faulty education" of women greatly contributed to their inferior status. The author regarded education as a crucial ingredient in the task of bringing about a new social order in which women would attain their equal and rightful places with men. She stated in A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN "that a proper education; or, to speak with more precision, a well studied mind . . . would enable a woman to support a single life with dignity.[2]

She believed that the commonly held educational practices and beliefs, at home and in school, implanted

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[1]Coole, D. H. Women in Political History (Lynne Reinner Publishers, Boulder, Colorado, 1988). p. 120.

[2]Schneir, M. Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings (Vintage Books, New York, 1972). p. 11.

false notions about women's emotional and intellectual capabilities. Such attitudes were supported by a "cult of sensibility (which) stressed those qualities considered feminine in the sexual psychology of the time: intuitive sympathy, susceptibility, emotionalism and passivity."[3] The widely proclaimed writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau contributed to the stereotypical image of women by "loudly assert(ing) a biological absolute that separates female from male physically, mentally, and emotionally."[4]

Mary described women as "taught from their infancy that beauty is a woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming around its gilded cage, only seeks to adorn its prison."[5] Such culturally instilled attitudes, she believed, dissuaded many women from seeking any attainments in society other than the conventionally ordained roles of wife and mother. As a result, Wollstonecraft asks: "How many women waste away, the prey of discontent, who might have practiced

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[3]Todd, J. Sensibility: An Introduction (Methuen, London, 1986). p. 110.

[4]Ibid. p. 20.

[5]Ferguson, M. Mary Wollstonecraft (Twayne Publishers, Boston, Massachusetts, 1984). p. 127.

as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop and stood erect, supported by her own industry." [6]

During her short lifetime, Mary witnessed a new era of societal change emerging in Georgian England, spurred on by the increasing political strength and wealth of the middle classes. These new conditions were brought about by the shift from a primarily agricultural society to a world-wide commercial and industrial empire driven by an expanding urban based capitalist economy. In such a society gender or social class was becoming of lesser importance than ability, motivation, and education.

As opportunities slowly opened up for women, some, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, envisioned new roles for themselves in addition to marriage and motherhood. Wollstonecraft's prophetic agenda for the improvement of women's condition would help serve as an inspiration for the feminist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The future author, educator and pioneer feminist was born in London, in 1759, one year before the

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[6]Rossi, A. The Feminist Papers: From Adams to Beauvoir (Columbia University Press, New York, 1973). p. 70.

accession of King George III to the English throne. The second of seven children, Mary was raised in an unstable, abusive household dominated by Edward Wollstonecraft, her drunken and brutal father, who might strike "her mother as he struck his children and his dogs."[7] Wollstonecraft eventually dissipated a substantial family inheritance unsuccessfully attempting to establish himself as a gentleman farmer rather than pursuing his family's profitable weaving trade. As a result, Mary's childhood was marked by the family's descent into impoverishment as well as numerous and unsettling moves from one southern English town to another.

Mary Wollstonecraft's formal childhood education was "predictably meager" though she may have attended "a Yorkshire Day-School."[8] Some communities supported local grammar schools for boys or otherwise the wealthier squires hired tutors for their sons'

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[7]James, H. R. Mary Wollstonecraft: A Sketch (Oxford University Press, London, 1932). p. 13.

[8]Tomalin, C. The Life & Death of Mary Wollstonecraft (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, New York, 1974). p. 17.

education.[9] However, through an "assiduous correspondence" with her close friend and neighbor, Fanny Blood, an accomplished young gentlewoman, "who undertook to be her instructor,"[10] Mary acquired a reasonable command of the written language. In general, though, girls' education was limited to charity schools and a few "female academies" mostly affordable to the wealthier classes. The limited curriculum in such schools was primarily restricted to "female interests."

Only males were allowed into England's "Public" schools and universities, even though English law had stated otherwise. The ancient STATUTE OF ARTIFICERS (1406), "which can be called the first education law in England" proclaimed that "every man or woman, of whatever state or condition he may be, shall be free to set their son or daughter to take learning at any school that pleaseth them within the realm."[11]

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[9]Trevelyan, G. M. English Social History (Longmans, Green, London, 1944). p. 309.

[10]Godwin, W. Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft, Ed. W. C. Durant (Gordon Press, New York, 1972). p. 20.

[11]Good, H. A History of Western Education, Third Edition (Macmillan Publishing Co., New York, 1969). p. 402.

Unfortunately, this statute was universally ignored and eventually conveniently forgotten.

When Mary reached the age of nineteen, she sought escape from her unhappy home life by accepting employment as a lady's companion to an elderly widow in Bath, England. For two years she chafed at her "state of dependence" and in the autumn of 1781 returned to her parents home, now located in Enfield, near London. She arrived in time to endure more of her father's "punishing behavior" and her mother's death in the spring of 1782. At last, feeling free of any further parental ties, Mary decided to seek independence by establishing a school for young girls, determined that such an undertaking might help support her sisters and her friend, Fanny Blood. One source of her inspiration may have been the opening, in 1781, of a "New Academy of Female Education" in Catherine Place, Bath. The academy was established by Jane Arden and her sisters, a friend and correspondent of Mary's.[12] According to Claire Tomalin, one of her biographers:

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[12]Wardle, R. Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft (Cornell University Press, New York, 1979). p. 12.

> At this distance in time such a move by Mary and her entourage might seem ludicrous, but in fact it was an entirely plausible risk . . . teaching required no qualifications and even less capital than shopkeeping. The very thing that made it attractive to Mary . . . it had become the traditional last resort of the penniless.[13]

Mary eventually opened her school at Newington Green, north of London. Until about 1696, the Green was the site of a boys academy established by the Rev. Charles Morton, an independent minister, master of mathematics, English and physics and graduate of Oxford, who, later in life, became Vice-President of Harvard College in America. The academy's most illustrious pupil, Daniel Defoe, author of Robinson Crusoe, fondly remembered Rev. Morton as a great educator.[14] Morton's Academy helped contribute to the intellectual tone of free inquiry that led to the creation of a peaceful enclave for "dissident

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[13]Tomalin, Life & Death of Mary Wollstonecraft, p. 20.

[14]Moore, J. R. Daniel Defoe: Citizen of the Modern World (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1958). p. 36.

intellectuals, pedagogues with reforming ideas and (religious) dissenters."[15] For the first time in her life Mary Wollstonecraft found herself in the midst of a community of liberal thinkers where "women were accepted . . . as reasonable human beings."[16] During this period "Wollstonecraft encountered fresh ideas about education, pedagogy and rhetoric."[17] As a result, Mary's intellectual horizons greatly expanded, encouraged by such friends and neighbors as the notable Dr. Richard Price, a Unitarian minister of the Dissenting Chapel at the Green. Price was a radical intellectual, a Fellow of the Royal Society and "moral philosopher of civil liberty whose home was a haven for distinguished liberals, among them, the Unitarian minister and discoverer of oxygen, Dr. Joseph Priestley."[18] Dr. Price was also a leading advocate of national economic and parliamentary reform and an active correspondent with the leading philosophers,

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[15]Tomalin, Life & Death of Mary Wollstonecraft, p. 31.

[16]Wardle, R. Mary Wollstonecraft, A Critical Biography (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1951). p. 34.

[17]Ferguson, Mary Wollstonecraft.

[18]Wardle, Mary Wollstonecraft.

radicals and revolutionaries of the time, including Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, David Hume and Marquis de Condorcet.

Mary absorbed from her Dissenter friends at Newington Green the social, psychological and educational theories of John Locke, the psychologist, David Hartley, and the French philosophes. "Their conversation and literary works stimulated her to consider the social basis of tyranny, she had endured at home and in Bath and they provided her with a framework of ideas into which her own experience could fit."[19]

The school Mary opened at Newington Green operated for about two years with Mary serving as the guiding light and the rest of the faculty consisting of Mary's two younger sisters, Eliza and Everina; and her friend, Fanny Blood. Mary received support for her enterprise from such Newington Green friends as the widow Sarah Burgh whose husband James, "had kept a school there and

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[19]Todd, J. Ed. A Wollstonecraft Anthology (Columbia University Press, New York, 1990). p. 4.

had probed the question of female education"[20] in his THOUGHTS ON EDUCATION (1747).

Though Mary Wollstonecraft has left us very few details of her school's daily operations, it can be surmised that "most were day pupils" and that other than teaching French, "nothing sophisticated could be offered in the way of instruction, but Fanny could teach drawing and sewing, and Eliza and Everina hopefully pass on whatever their Chelsea Boarding School had given them."[21]

In February 1785, Fanny Blood left the Newington Green school and traveled to Portugal in order to marry a London merchant residing in Lisbon. Towards the end of 1785, Fanny, critically ill and about to give birth, implored Mary to visit her. Mary turned the operation of the school over to her sisters and sailed for Lisbon, arriving just before the birth of Fanny's daughter and Fanny's death shortly thereafter. Upon returning to Newington Green in January 1786, Mary found the school empty of students and her sisters

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[20]Wollstonecraft, M. Edited by Miriam Kramnick. Vindication of the Rights of Woman (Penguin Books, New York, 1962). p. 10.

[21]Tomalin, Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft, p. 30.

squabbling among themselves. Faced with mounting bills and an undependable faculty, Mary decided to close the school. It was at this dismal low-point in Mary's attempt to achieve economic independence and security that she reluctantly accepted a position as governess to Lord and Lady Kingsborough's family in Ireland. During this period Mary found time to complete the manuscript for her first book in six weeks. On advice of a friend, she submitted it to Mr. Joseph Johnson, a London book publisher and Radical Dissenter," . . . who had a special interest in educational books."[22] Johnson paid Mary ten guineas for the work and published it under the title of: THOUGHTS ON THE EDUCATION OF DAUGHTERS, in the spring of 1786. According to one of Mary's biographers, Janet Todd:

> (The book) aimed to show the sad results of the faulty education usually afforded to females and to outline a more rational and suitable one. Much of the argument is based on the theories of John Locke who, nearly a century before, had started the trend toward dealing with children as individuals and

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[22]Tomalin, Life & Death of Mary Wollstonecraft, p. 40.

adapting instruction to fit their capacities. Some of the illustrations . . . notably that concerning the horrors of dependent females . . . clearly derives from Wollstonecraft's own experience as a companion and teacher.[23]

About March 1786, Mary, on her journey north to begin work as governess with the Kingsboroughs, stayed until October at Eton Public School, actually a private school, as a guest of the Rev. John Prior, an Eton schoolmaster, and his wife. There she awaited the arrival of the Kingsborough girls for the trip back to their home in Ireland. The unexpected interlude at Eton gave Mary a firsthand opportunity to study this ancient institution reserved for the education of England's young male elite. Mary carefully observed the manners and conduct of that celebrated academy "and the ideas she retained of it were by no means favorable."[24]

Mary found fault with the severe hierarchical authority and submissive roles of the younger boys to upperclassmen, known as "fagging." She regarded this

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[23]Todd, A Wollstonecraft Anthology, p. 27.

[24]Godwin, Memoirs, p. 39.

coercive system as creating "hot-beds of vice and folly, and the knowledge of human nature supposed to be obtained there, merely cunning and selfishness."[25] The antiquated curriculum concentrated entirely on the classics to the complete detriment of the natural sciences. Some years afterwards, Mary wrote in the Monthly Review, perhaps reflecting on her Eton experience, that: "boys who have received a classical education, load their memory with words, and the correspondent ideas are perhaps never distinctly comprehended. As proof of this assertion, I must observe, that I have known many young people who could write tolerable smooth verses, and string epithets prettily together, when their prose themes showed barrenness of their minds, and how superficial cultivation must have been, which the understanding had received."[26]

One writer notes that "the system hardly prepared young men for life; in fact it turned out some strange anomalies . . . Canning (a future Foreign Office Secretary), for instance, who could write Sapphics

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[25]Wollstonecraft, Vindication, p. 274.

[26]Todd, A Wollstonecraft Anthology, p. 173.

(poetry) without a flaw in quantity, but was dumbfounded to learn, years after graduation, that a frog developed from a tadpole."[27]

In October 1786, Mary renewed her journey and finally arrived at the Kingsborough estate at Mitchelstown, in County Cork, about 170 miles from Dublin. Within a short time of her employment as governess, a mutual dislike arose between her and Lady Kingsborough primarily stemming from the Lady's jealousy over her young daughters growing infatuation for their governess. Upon taking up her duties "Mary immediately restored the children to their liberty (from a number of irksome prohibitions imposed by Lady Kingsborough), and undertook to govern them by their affections only.[28]

Mary's experience with the frivolous behavior and vacuous existence of the "haughty and disagreeable" Lady Kingsborough, a paradigm of 17th century aristocratic female upbringing, would be roundly condemned in her future writings. During her year with the Kingsboroughs Mary read EMILE, Jean Jacques

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[27]Wardle, Mary Wollstonecraft, p. 57.

[28]Godwin, Memoirs, p. 40.

Rousseau's didactic novel on "natural" education, a work that would have a profound effect on the development of her ideas on the education of women.

Mary also found time to draft the manuscript of her first novel, MARY, A FICTION, which was published in the following year by her recently found mentor, Joseph Johnson, "the patron of many hungry and aspiring young writers."[29] In the summer of 1787, Mary looked forward to accompanying the Kingsboroughs on their vacation to Bristol but Lady Kingsborough had other plans and Mary " . . . closed her connection with them earlier than she otherwise proposed to do."[30]

In need of work, Wollstonecraft departed for London to seek help from her publisher, Joseph Johnson, whose bookseller's shop was located in the heart of old London, at 72 St. Paul's Churchyard. His apartment, located above the shop, served as a popular gathering place for liberals and dissenters of varying stripes. Johnson's "conversational Tuesday night dinners" included, among others, such company as: the painter, Henry Fuseli; the pamphleteer, Thomas Paine; the poets

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[29]Wollstonecraft, Vindication, p. 13.

[30]Godwin, Memoirs, p. 42.

William Cowper and William Blake (who would illustrate one of Mary's books); the chemist and Unitarian minister, Joseph Priestley; and the political author and philosopher, William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft's future husband.[31] Mary quickly became a full-fledged member of these popular intellectual gatherings.

In May of 1788, Joseph Johnson and his colleague, Thomas Christie, launched ANALYTICAL REVIEW, a liberal, radical literary journal to be published several times a year. The journal contained reviews on a wide variety of subjects including politics, travel, fiction, children's stories, romances and education. Mary served as editor and book reviewer for the journal until the end of her life, contributing numerous reviews and articles for publication. Assigned by Johnson to translate and edit a number of books, Mary set herself to the task of learning several foreign languages. Godwin noted that "with this view she improved herself in French, with which she had previously had but a slight acquaintance and acquired

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[31]Erdman, D. Blake, Prophet Against Empire, 3rd. Ed. (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1977). p. 156.

the Italian and German languages."[32] Through her work on translations, Mary broadened the scope of her knowledge about progressive education movements in Europe.

Her translation of ELEMENTS OF MORALITY FOR THE USE OF CHILDREN, introduced Mary to the ideas of Christian Salzmann, an educational reformer influenced by Locke's THOUGHTS ON EDUCATION. Originally associated with the German educational pioneer, Johann Basedow, Salzmann established his own Philanthropinum, a forerunner of the modern secondary school, in the duchy of Saxe-Gotha, in 1784. Salzmann taught that "the immediate surroundings and the life of the present should engage the children's attention," rather than the "new humanism in its emphasis on Latin and Greek and its preoccupation with distant lands and ancient peoples."[33] As a result of Mary's successful translation of Salzmann's book into English, Salzmann, at a later date, translated into German her epic work: A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN, thus helping to

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[32]Godwin, Memoirs, p. 45.

[33]Good, Western Education, p. 233.

disseminate Wollstonecraft's feminist and educational views to a wider European audience.[34]

In July, 1789, the electrifying news reached England that the Bastille in Paris had fallen to a mob, signalling the beginning of the French Revolution. The toppling of the French monarchy and the proclamation of "liberty, equality, fraternity," galvanized England into two opposing camps. On the one hand, the conservatives and their spokesman, Edmund Burke, the distinguished Anglo-Irish parliamentarian viewed the Revolution as a threat to the very basis of social stability that had been so forcefully created and maintained for a thousand years through the political alliance of church and state. On the other hand, Mary and the other liberals welcomed the Revolution as a major step in society's progress towards creating a new age of justice and equality.

In November, 1789, Mary Wollstonecraft's friend and neighbor from Newington Green days, Dr. Richard Price, delivered a speech before the Society Commemorating the Glorious Revolution of 1688, "in which he welcomed the revolutionary events in France

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[34]Godwin, Memoirs, p. 45.

and called for reform in England."[35] The conservative, Edmund Burke, quickly responded to Price's speech with his book: REFLECTIONS ON THE FRENCH REVOLUTION. In this work he strongly condemned those who supported the overthrow of ancient institutions, classes and privileges. "Mary, full of sentiments of liberty, and impressed with a warm interest in the struggle that now was going on, seized her pen in the full burst of indignation . . ."[36] and wrote her response to Burke. In A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MEN Mary defended a "belief in liberty and political rights; it argues for the greater equality for humanity and the removal of traditional injustices of property and rank."[37] In this work "the seeds of the RIGHTS OF WOMAN are sown in this answer to Burke, as surely as the rights of man must imply the rights of woman."[38]

In September 1791, with the encouragement of her publisher, Mary completed the final draft of her next

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[35]Todd, A Wollstonecraft Anthology, p. 8.

[36]Godwin, Memoirs, p. 51.

[37]Ferguson, Mary Wollstonecraft, p. 44.

[38]Wollstonecraft, Vindication, p. 17.

and most illustrious work: A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN. It appeared in early 1792, shortly after the appearance of Thomas Paine's RIGHTS OF MAN. "The subject of women's rights was in the air and needed an outspoken champion in England; why should Mary not produce a second VINDICATION for her own sex?"[39] Within French and English Enlightenment circles philosphers debated women's social and political roles and their legal rights. In VINDICATION Mary enlarged upon "faulty education" as a major source of women's suppression. Mary observed that "For the rights of woman, my main argument is built on the simple principle, that if she is not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for the truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice."[40]

In the past, several women authors had already printed works in defense of women's rights in which education plays a role. As early as 1673, AN ESSAY TO REVIVE THE ANCIENT EDUCATION OF GENTLEWOMEN, was

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[39]Tomalin, Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft, p. 102.

[40]Wollstonecraft, Vindication, p. 86.

published under the name of a Mrs. Makin. In 1694, Mary Astell proposed a "genteel" education for the daughters of noble families in "A SERIOUS PROPOSAL TO THE LADIES FOR THEIR TRUE AND GREATEST INTEREST."[41] In 1740, using the pen name "Sophia" (generally believed to be Lady Mary Wortley Montague), appeared a book entitled: WOMAN NOT INFERIOR TO MEN, which "argued not only for better education for women but also for a better position in society."[42]

In November 1790, Mary reviewed for Analytical Review, LETTERS ON EDUCATION, by Catherine Macauley. This book "laid some of the groundwork for Wollstonecraft's RIGHTS OF WOMAN as did Richard Price's sermon "On the Love of Country."[43] According to Janet Todd,[44] "Macauley argued that women must be educated before they could develop morally and she blamed their apparent triviality on the predominately sexual character they had been forced to adopt in male society."[7]

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[41]Wollstonecraft, Vindication, p. 31-32.

[42]Wardle, Mary Wollstonecraft, p. 143.

[43]Kramnick, Vindication, p. 15.

[44]Todd, A Wollstonecraft Anthology, p. 9.

In A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN, Mary Wollstonecraft presents a broad program of educational reform including a recommendation for publicly supported education on a national scale. Now, on the two hundredth anniversary of its publication, the educational proposals of Mary Wollstonecraft reflect her remarkable foresight. Speaking of her own times she remarked that:

> I have turned over various books written on the subject of education, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools; but what has been the result? -- a profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is the grand source of misery I deplore, and that women, in particular, are rendered weak and wretched . . . I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men . . . That the instruction which women have hitherto received has only tended, with the constitution of civil society, to render them insignificant objects of desire- mere

> propagators of Fools! The education of women has been attended . . . in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments; meanwhile strength of body and mind are sacrificed to . . . notions of beauty.[45]

In A VINDICATION, Mary rejected the commonly held notion that women were innately weak, frivolous, passive, and nonrational. Such behaviors, she contended, were shaped by society through faulty educational practices. This could be overcome by boys and girls sharing an equal education whose aim is to gain "such an exercise of understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart."[46]

Two major contemporary sources of Mary Wollstonecraft's educational views were primarily derived from the writings of John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau. She was also influenced by the Enlightenment philosophes who sought truth in nature from which, they believed, natural laws could be derived through the use of reason. The rationalists

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[45]Wollstonecraft, Vindication, p. 79-81.

[46]Ibid., p. 103.

held that the application of natural laws to society would lead to the progressive improvement of civilization.

According to Gerald Gutek, John Locke's ESSAY CONCERNING HUMAN UNDERSTANDING, was an "important source of Enlightenment theory." Gutek goes on to say that "denying the existence of innate ideas in the human mind, Locke's essay asserted that ideas originated in the individual's sensory experience of external objects and were formed into concepts by the mind's power of cognition."[47]

Jean Jacques Rousseau's didactic novel, EMILE, also plays a particularly important role in the development of Mary Wollstonecraft's educational views, however, with one crucial reservation. Though Mary was basically in accord with Rousseau's educational theories as espoused in EMILE, she refused to limit their application to boys only, as he did. In fact "much of the VINDICATION is a refutation of Rousseau's theories about the (inferiority) of women."[48]

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[47]Gutek, G. Cultural Foundations of Education: A Biographical Introduction. (Macmillan Publishing Co., New York, 1991). p. 121.

[48]Wollstonecraft, Vindication, p. 52.

Nevertheless, Rousseau's ideas on education, when applied equally to both sexes are central to Wollstonecraft's own pedagogical beliefs.

According to Rousseau, the child's true source of learning is directly through nature and experience. Education should not be based on rote-learning but rather on the child's exploring, experiencing, and understanding his environment by following his own interests and impulses. As the child matures mentally and physically, his rational and cognitive faculties are ready for learning subjects such as reading and literature, history, mathematics, geography and science. In the adolescence stage of development the youth is now capable of integrating into his expanding cognitive domain an awareness of social and moral responsibilities. Later in this stage Rousseau permits Emile to travel and experience the world of city life with his bride, Sophie. Thus, says Rousseau, through a natural education the formative stages of life are satisfactorily fulfilled.

Upon such philosophical foundations, Mary Wollstonecraft's educational agenda addressed a number of specific issues that places her in the mainstream of

Western educational thought, along with Johann Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, John Dewey, and others.

ELEMENTARY EDUCATION. Mary Wollstonecraft advocated "day-schools for particular ages . . . established by government, in which boys and girls, might be educated together. The school for younger children, from five to nine years of age, ought to be absolutely free and open to all (social) classes . . . where boys and girls of the rich and poor should meet together."[49] "Were boys and girls permitted to pursue the same studies together, those graceful decencies might early be inculcated which produce modesty without those sexual distinctions that taint the mind. Lessons of politeness, and that formulary of decorum, which treads on the heels of falsehood, would be rendered useless by habitual propriety of behavior."[50]

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION. Mary stressed that teachers should emphasize learning through sensory experiences rather than rote-learning because " . . . many things improve and amuse the senses, when introduced as a kind of show, to the principles of

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[49]Wollstonecraft, Vindication, p. 286.

[50]Ibid., p. 283.

which (that is, generalizations without experiences), dryly laid down, children would turn a deaf ear".[51] Mary believed that such a learning approach could be applied to "botany, mechanics, and astronomy; reading, writing, arithmetic, natural history, and some simple experiments in natural philosophy (science), might fill up the day."[52] Lessons should be planned and organized so that: "In order to open their faculties they should be excited to think for themselves; and this can only be done by mixing a number of children together, and making them jointly pursue the same objects."[53]

By the use of a question and answer dialogue, "conversations in Socratic form", Mary believed a more meaningful understanding could be gained of such subjects as "elements of religion, history, the history of man, and politics . . ." Through rote-memorization, Mary asks, "How much time is lost in teaching (students) to recite what they do not understand"?[54]

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[51]Ibid., p. 287.

[52]Ibid., p. 273.

[53]Ibid., p. 273.

[54]Ibid., p. 280.

As a result "the memory is loaded with unintelligible words, to make a show of, without the understanding's acquiring any distinct ideas: but only that education deserves emphatically to be termed cultivation of the mind, which teaches young people, how to begin to think."[55]

BEYOND ELEMENTARY EDUCATION. Mary proposed dual tracking for more advanced education; one track for students pursuing vocational or career education, and another track for what today would be called college preparatory schooling. According to Mary, boys and girls reaching the age of nine and destined for "domestic employment and mechanical trades ought to be removed to other schools and receive instruction or some measure appropriate to the destination of each individual, the two sexes being still together . . ." For "young people of superior abilities or fortune," Wollstonecraft recommended that they "might now be taught in another school the dead (Latin and Greek) languages and living languages, the elements of science and continue the study of history and politics, on a

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[55]Ibid., p. 280.

more extensive scale, which would not exclude polite literature."[56]

PHYSICAL EDUCATION. Play and more formal exercise Mary regarded as an essential component of boys and girls education. This was in direct contradiction to the prevailing Puritan suspicion that play was the "devil's work." According to Wollstonecraft, "the school room ought to be surrounded by a large piece of ground, in which the children might be usefully exercised, for at this age they should not be confined to any sedentary employment for more than one hour at a time."[57]

HEALTH EDUCATION. Mary Wollstonecraft, who died in childbirth from an infection, due to medical incompetence, recommended that in "the national education of women, (they) "should be taught the elements of anatomy and medicine, not only to enable them to take proper care of their own health, but to make them rational nurses of their infants, parents, and husbands . . ."[58]

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[56]Ibid., p. 287.

[57]Ibid., p. 286-287.

[58]Rossi, The Feminist Papers, p. 84.

MORAL EDUCATION. Mary Wollstonecraft, believed that her educational proposals would lead to a greater moral sensibility. By "allowing (boys and girls) to share the advantages of education and government . . . see whether they will become better, as they become wiser and grow more free."[59] "These would be the schools of morality" (in which) " . . . women must be allowed to found their virtue on knowledge, which is scarcely possible unless they be educated by the same pursuits as men."[60]

DISCIPLINE. "Mr. Locke very judiciously observes that if the mind be curbed and humbled too much in children; if their spirits be curbed and broken much by too strict a hand over them, they lose all their vigor and industry."[61] Wollstonecraft's suggestion that "making the children independent of their masters respecting punishments . . . they should be tried by their peers," has essentially gone untested in America's public schools.

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[59]Wollstonecraft, Vindication, p. 286.

[60]Ibid. p. 288, 293-294.

[61]Ibid. p. 270.

TEACHER SUPERVISION. In an era that did not require any kind of formal training and certification for teaching children, Mary recommended the establishment of a process for screening out incompetent or abusive instructors. To do this "a sufficient number of masters should also be chosen by a select committee in each Parish to whom any complaint of negligence, might be made, if signed by six of the children's parents."[62]

Shortly after the publication of A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN in 1792, it was translated into French and German. An American edition appeared in 1794. The effect of its message about women's rights and education can best be judged by the numerous critics, who felt obliged to praise or denounce Mary Wollstonecraft's work and character. Though the literary journals, such as THE GENERAL MAGAZINE and the MONTHLY MAGAZINE, praised her latest work, others were not so appreciative. One of Wollstonecraft's biographers notes that: the Bluestocking, Hannah More, "informed Horace Walpole that she was 'invincibly resolved' not to read the book, adding that to her way

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[62]Rossi, The Feminist Papers, p. 78.

of thinking "there is something fantastic and absurd in the very title."[63] He goes on to say that: "Horace Walpole lauded Hannah More's determination not to read THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN, declared that he himself would not look at it, and classed Mary with Tom Paine and Horne Tooke as one of "the Philosophizing serpents we have in our bosom." She was later described as "a hyena in petticoats."[64] Satirists had a field day; one entitled his literary rebuttal for women's rights: A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF BRUTES.

During the period A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN was published, Mary and other English liberals felt growing concern as the Enlightenment inspired ideals of the French Revolution, that she had so vehemently defended against Burke, deteriorated into a bloody struggle between opposing political factions. She decided to visit France; ostensibly to improve her French. She was, in fact, eager to observe and record the progress of her feminist and educational agenda's role in the creation of a new society, and possibly "hoping to influence legislation before the French

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[63]Wardle, Mary Wollstonecraft, p. 159.

[64]Ibid., p. 159.

Assembly."[65] Her firsthand knowledge of the Revolution would lead to the publication of AN HISTORICAL AND MORAL VIEW OF THE ORIGIN AND PROGRESS OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION, in 1794.

By late 1791, the French National Assembly approved a new constitution for the country.[66] It proclaimed "a national system of primary and secondary education, universal, free, equal for both sexes and removed from ecclesiastical influence."[67] A contributor to this policy was the French statesman, Talleyrand from whose "sensible pamphlet" on education Mary "borrowed" some of her ideas.[68] During a visit to London he was entertained by Mary soon after the publication of VINDICATION. She was no doubt pleased and flattered to meet firsthand the illustrious political figure to whom her work was dedicated.

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[65]Wollstonecraft, Vindication, p. 18.

[66]Stewart, J. H. A Documentary Survey of the French Revolution. (Macmillan Publishing Co., New York, 1951). p. 232.

[67]Durant, W. and A. The Story of Civilization, Rousseau and Revolution, Volume Ten. (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1967). p. 894.

[68]Kramnick, Vindication, p. 286.

Mary arrived in Paris in December, 1792, in time to witness the King being led to his trial and eventual execution. The following year France declared war on England. At this time a decree was issued "which indiscriminately incarcerated all British subjects who were at that moment in the country."[69] Fearing personal danger Mary sought safety through her recent acquaintance with Gilbert Imlay, an American adventurer, who registered Mary, for her own protection, as "Mrs. Imlay", at the American Embassy, in Paris. Their liaison produced an infant daughter, but much to Mary's consternation, Imlay abandoned her, leaving Mary with the total responsibility of the child's upbringing. After many difficult travels and personal hardships, Mary returned to London in 1795 and resumed her writing and editorial career.

Unfortunately, the widely heralded goals of the Revolution did not lead to an egalitarian society following the collapse of the Ancien Regime; rather, in its excesses the stage was prepared for the eventual dictatorship of Napoleon. Women, who helped incite the Revolution by storming the Bastille and marching on

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[69]Durant, Story of Civilization, Vol. 10, p. 253.

Versailles were eventually shunted aside even though "women at crucial points were of decisive importance in the Revolution."[70]

In the few years left before her untimely death, Mary continued her literary career. She also renewed her acquaintance with a fellow liberal and champion of many social causes, William Godwin, author of the influential work: AN INQUIRY CONCERNING POLITICAL JUSTICE. In early March, 1797, Mary and William Godwin were married at St. Pancras Church in London. On September 10th, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin died from puerperal fever at thirty eight years of age, giving birth to a healthy daughter. This infant, also named Mary, would grow up to be famous in her own right as the wife of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the author of the immortal story: FRANKENSTEIN; OR, THE MODERN PROMETHEUS.

In the past two hundred years the life and works of Mary Wollstonecraft have evoked a wide spectrum of reactions from the public. Her message about women's rights and education, in many cases was distorted or

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[70]Doyle, W. The Oxford History of the French Revolution. (Oxford University Press, Oxford, United Kingdom, 1990). p. 420.

ignored and the author branded irreligious or dissolute. This was particularly true during the Victorian Age in which open and honest opinions about sex and women's rights were engulfed in hypocrisy posing as high moral virtue. The general tone of criticism appeared in the EUROPEAN MAGAZINE (1798). Its critic predicted that " . . . (she) will be read with disgust by every female who has any pretensions of delicacy; with detestation by everyone attached to the interests of religion and morality; and with indignation by anyone who might feel any regard for the unhappy woman, whose frailties should have been buried."[71]

In a letter to a friend Mary wrote:

> Those who are bold enough to advance before the age they live in, and to throw off, by the force of their own minds, the prejudices which the maturing reason of the world will in time disavow, must learn to brave censure. We ought not to be too anxious respecting the opinion of others--I am not fond of vindications--Those who know me will suppose

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[71]Godwin, Memoirs, p. 341.

I acted from principle--Nay, as we in general give others credit for worth, in proportion as we possess it--I am easy with regard to the opinions of the best part of mankind--I rest on my own.[72]

[72]Todd, Anthology, p. 266.

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